December 18, 2012

Co-chairs del Valle and Allensworth,

I appreciate the opportunity to participate on the Commission on High School Graduation, Achievement and Success Taskforce, and the opportunity to provide feedback on the Commission's recommendations. I am in concurrence with much of the substance of the recommendations discussed heretofore – I offer below some additional thoughts for consideration, drawn primarily from the experiences of the community school practitioners, community partners, and district and school leadership with whom the Federation for Community Schools works.

My comments below center on three main areas themes – the need for consistency across the state in how we are defining key terms and metrics; the need for coordination of efforts, supports and strategies at the school, district and state levels and; the role that parents and communities can and must play in keeping students engaged in school and on track for graduation.

Respectfully submitted,
Melissa

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Recommendations for the Commission on High School Graduation, Achievement and Success

ESTABLISHING COMMON DEFININTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS AT THE STATE LEVEL
The state needs to develop definitions – grounded in research and data – of metrics that provide information about a student's progress towards or away from graduation. Schools, districts and communities should be held accountable for accessing, sharing, and using data to move kids successfully through high school.
State will use research and data to:

- Develop a state-wide definition of 9th grade on-track (including early warning indicators) and
  - Disseminate the definition, relevant data, and support for districts/schools to understand and use 9th grade on track data
  - Set expectations and accountability around use of 9th grade on-track data to target interventions and supports to students (just-in-time reports, weekly reports and dissemination of relevant data), including school and district-developed plans for addressing warning signs
- State will also use a similar process to define chronic truancy *and* chronic absenteeism at a state level and follow a similar process outlined above to ensure schools and districts are tracking and acting on chronic truancy and absenteeism
- State will provide guidance on schools' and districts' use of data and putting in place intervention plans that include parents and community partners
- The state will define "milestone metrics" that can be used to identify students who are at risk of dropping out or not being entirely successful in high school earlier

COORDINATING EFFORTS, STRATEGIES AND FUNDING
Efforts around and investments in programs that aim to reduce the dropout rate need to be coordinated at the state, district and school level to ensure that the right supports are getting to the right students. In addition to determining costs and prioritizing funding, we need to prioritize effective and coordinated use of resources.

- At the school level – more isn't "better;" history of bringing in a host of partners and programs to address high school drop out/the need to better engage students in school, but we do so in uncoordinated and unsustainable ways.
  - In high-need/low-engagement/high dropout rate schools, putting in place a full-time staff member whose job it is to support students in each of the three "disengagement buckets" – those who have already dropped out (or been pushed out or are truant beyond the definition of "chronic"), those who are borderline/with one foot out the door, and those who are "benignly disengaged" (who are probably on track to graduate but for whom a small nudge or bump in the road could throw them off track).
  - Use data to identify students in each bucket – including progress and improvement and patterns that may indicate a student is sliding towards disengagement.
  - Ensure that it isn't "more" programs or partnerships but the right programs and partnerships, directed at the right students, at the right time – we need to use data and coordination to "intervene smarter."
- At the district level:
  - Accountability structures in place around earlier intervention and prevention programs
  - Training and support for schools to develop plans – including strategies and best practices

- - Connections to other high schools, connections between high schools and middle and elementary schools; provisions of options at the district level for students who aren't succeeding in a traditional high school environment (i.e., alternative schools).
- At the state level:
  - Ensure adequate and sustained funding for strategies that prove effective in keeping students engaged in school, reaching students who are "borderline," and options for students who have dropped out.
  - Ensure intra-and-inter-departmental coordination of any and all funding/programs designed to address dropout and student engagement.
  - Ensure that state-level data systems include governance structures that allow for partner access to relevant data to support school and district efforts to address the dropout problem and support student engagement (Cincinnati STRIVE model) – get everyone on the same page.
  - Ensure that districts and the state create offer a range of options for students who do not or cannot – for any number of reasons – succeed in a traditional high school environment, including alternative schools, and we need to have an adequate number of "seats" in these options.

ROLE FAMILIES AND COMMUNITY PARTNERS
Families and community partners need to be engaged as part of the solution, and as such, need to have access to data about progress towards graduation and structures through which they can bring their expertise to bear on addressing the myriad factors underlying students' disengagement with school.

- Ensure that parents and community members understand the data and what it tells us about our students (i.e., through new report card, through public awareness campaigns)
- Valuing and coordinating the role community partners play in addressing the dropout and truancy crisis – this is again where a full-time coordinator comes into play, ensure that the community-based resources that kids might need (mental health supports, childcare, transportation) are properly directed.
- Partner access to data – everyone with a stake in a student's high school success is on the same page about progress towards – or away from – graduation.

COMMON SENSE APPROACHES
We need to evaluate and assess existing policies and proposed policies to make sure that they make sense in the "real world" and in a real high school, and to ensure that we do what we research and experiences tells us is effective.

- Establish supportive climates and cultures of success – PBIS/CPS' YDPBSS initiatives, range of learning experiences, mentorship, personal connection to each student, high expectations for all.
- Addressing underlying causes of disruptive behavior versus suspension/zero tolerance, a more common sense approach all around (i.e., students being issued suspensions for being chronically truant…that's not a common-sense solution).
- Funding flexibility – look at restructuring grant/funding parameters to enable schools and partners to better meet the needs of high school students (not one size fits all) –
  - Title I –needs to be structured to provide remediation and support for all students who need it, with a priority on low-income students (instead of only low-income students). Needs to be allowable to fund a coordination role who can "staff" students and direct supports towards keeping students engaged in and successful in school

- o Other examples include 21st CCLC and Teen REACH –need be flexible to allow for programs that are developmentally appropriate for high schoolers – dosages and structures may need to be different
- Need to use time as a resource and provide districts, schools and partners with flexibility to do so – providing supports, additional learning opportunities, different pathways to mastering necessary skills (in some schools that means block schedules and in other schools that means support for online credit recovery, out-of-school time programs linked to classroom learning, mastery of core skills)